A Gateway to Tallinn
Architectural representation of genius loci

Reflection on the research and design process

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The project in the context of Explore Lab studio

The current graduation project “Gateway to Tallinn. Architectural representation of genius loci” was created in the framework of Explore Lab studio. Explore Lab is a research driven graduation-laboratory for students with a unique fascination which cannot be explored in any of the ‘regular’ thesis labs. The students who enter the studio have therefore many different research themes related to various locations all over the world. The students compose their own curriculum including workshops, lectures, excursions and visiting critics, based on their research fascinations. It is expected of a student to take responsibility and initiative in structuring their own graduation year from the research phase to the design phase in collaboration of other students in the studio.

The students begin by creating a study plan that will serve as a basis for the rest of the graduation year. The study plan includes the program, goals, deadlines and the explanation for choosing Explore Lab as a graduation-studio. The next step is to find the tutors that are active on your research field and ready to guide you throughout the graduation process.

During the graduation year the students work along two lines: the personal line that includes defining and working out own research theme, and a collective line that will unite and inspire the students by working together in a team for organizing the workshops, lectures and excursions.

explore-lab.
Research process

The begin phase of the research process was somewhat chaotic. I started by formulating the main goal of the research which was to find out how to transform the current Old City Harbor into a representative gateway to Tallinn, and how to create an attractive and lively area that will become an integral part of the modern cityscape. At first it seemed like a clear goal to follow, but it fast turned out to be more complex of an issue than imagined. I had to dig deeper for defining the key elements in my story, the “representativeness” and “attractive and lively area”, by formulating subquestions that would help me to reach the core problems of my research. It became clear that I wanted to find a way how to recreate the “feeling” or “experience” of being in Tallinn through the use of urban design and architecture on that area. The questions about the city representation in urban design and architecture lead me to the complex theories of “city branding” and “city identity”. I had come a step closer to clarifying the research issues.

By making myself acquainted on these fields by literature study I learned how important the issues currently were based on the amount of discussions and various perspectives on these subjects. Soon I realized that there exists no consensus on these issues and that these were problems difficult to define. Although I had gained a lot of new and useful knowledge I still hadn’t found the way how to achieve my goals. I decided to go one step at a time. The first thing was to try to define the identity of Tallinn based on the methodologies and theories that best suited with my goals.

In the search for the identity of Tallinn I planned to use three different methodologies: literature study about the history of the city and the issues of “city branding” and “identity”, ethnographical research by interviewing the visitors and citizens of the city and architectural and urban analysis. The preliminary planning for the research process was as follows, with the goal to have an idea of the identity of Tallinn for the P2 presentation:

September 2011:

- Make a structure for the research and design process
- Prepare P1 document and presentation
- Make a beginning with the research (literature survey)

October 2011:

- Continue with the research (literature survey)
- Prepare the next step of the research - interviews and questionnaires (ethnography)
- Make a beginning with the design process and site analysis, first ideas

November 2011:

- Visit Tallinn to carry out ethnographical research and collect information for architectural and urban analysis
- Continue with the research (literature survey)
- Make an architectural and urban analysis for the site and its surroundings
- Work on the design

December 2011:

- Complete the research process as much as possible
- Visit Tallinn for the information needed to finish the research
- Prepare P2 presentation

January 2012:

- P2 presentation (16.01.2012 - 23.01.2012)

The actual course of the process was somewhat different. The complexity of the theory made me stuck in the literature study for a bit too long. I felt a strong need to understand the different perspectives on the theory and find my own way for achieving my research goals within that framework. On the contrary, the amount of information was quite confusing. Due to the lack of a clear focus of my research I was trying to crasp
a too broad of a field of theory. It would have been easier to find a suitable theoretical framework if I had dared to make a decision about the focus of my research in the earlier phase of the process.

The first clarifying moments became during my visit to Tallinn. The method of interviewing the visitors and citizens proved to be very useful in the search for the identity of a city. Already after a couple of interviews a some sort of pattern began to emerge that could bring me closer to the answer of my research. There was a clear difference in the vision of Tallinn between the visitors and citizens. The interviews were an effective way to find out how the city is perceived.

When arriving back to the Netherlands I continued with the search for the identity of Tallinn. I needed to find out what caused the differences in the visions of Tallinn: why is the city perceived in a certain way, why the vision of visitors is different from the vision of citizens. I though that an analysis of the structure of Tallinn will bring me the answer.

The urban analysis was a essential tool in the study about the city of Tallinn. It provided me with an insight about the causes for the differences in perception and at the same time made it clear how the harbor area should be fitted in the context of the city. For the P2 presentation I had a clear view on how Tallinn is perceived by different groups of people and why, but had still no clue how to express this vision through urban and architectural design. At that stage it was difficult to draw a conclusion about the research. The study about the urban structure of Tallinn and a vision of how the harbor area should be fitted into that structure provided me with the next step in my research and design process.
Design process

The beginning of the design process was made during the visit to Tallinn when also the interviews with the visitors and citizens were conducted. During that time I visited the site many times by walking through the area taking photos and filming. I also had a couple of meetings with the representative of the Real Estate development of Port of Tallinn, Ahto Ader. In those meetings we discussed the current problems and future development plans of the harbor, and he suggested me a couple of strategic areas as a design location for my graduation project. Based on that I decided to use the Masterplan of the harbor, made by Sweco, as a basis for my project and chose a project location within that plan. The central area of the harbor, around the marina, seemed most interesting and important from the perspective of the harbor as well as the city.

As a next step I could formulate my coal for the design project. The design goal of the project was to propose an architectural solution for a specific part of the Old City Harbor area that would represent the uniqueness of Tallinn through architecture. The masterplan of Sweco would be used as a basis for the design. The project will concentrate on a specific part of the masterplan in order to propose an architectural solution for one building. That one building serves as an architectural example of Tallinn’s identity for the whole area.

After the P2 presentation a planning was made for the design part of the graduation project:

January 2012:

18: P2 presentation
23-29: work on thesis (architectural design strategy based on research)
30-5 Feb: work on thesis (finish the concept version)

February 2012:

6-12: preliminary plans, cross-cuts, 1:200 / 1:100
13-19: preliminary facades 1:200 / 1:100
20-26: preliminary part of the building, plan and cross-cut 1:50
27-4 Mar: preliminary façade fragment with hor. and vert. cross-cut 1:20

March 2012:

5-11: preliminary details 1:5 and preliminary 3D model
12-18: preliminary details 1:5 and preparing presentation
19-23: P3 presentation?
26-1: work on thesis (finish the final version)

April 2012:

2-8: situational drawing 1:5000 / 1:1000, plan b.g. in situ 1:500 (final)
9-15: plans, cross-cuts, facades 1:200 / 1:100
16-22: part of the building, plan and cross-cuts 1:50, façade fragment with hor. and vert. cross-cut 1: 2
23-29: details 1:5

May 2012:

30 apr - 6: 3D and maquette
7-13: maquette and preparing presentation
14-18: P4 presentation
21-27: plans, facades, cross-cuts 1:200 /1:100
28 - 3 jun: part of the building, plan and cross-cuts 1:50, façade fragment with hor. and vert. cross-cut 1: 2

June 2012:

4-10: details 1:5
11-17: 3D model and maquette
18-24: preparing presentation
25-29: P5 presentation

To get a better grasp of the area an urban model was made which gave me a good basis for playing around with the first conceptual architectural ideas. The three main concepts were developed and presented at the P3 presentation. The use of an urban model made clear the influences of these three concepts at a bigger scale and helped me choose between them. The model gave me the first ideas of how the area could look like.

The next step was to start drawing the chosen concept in AutoCad, to design a masterplan for the area. The most important element in that process was the issue of connectivity with the city and between the north and south parts of the harbor. I had to find the way how to connect different destinations with the central area of the harbor. The created structure of the paths on two level served as a basis for my masterplan. The inbetween spaces of these paths were filled with the building blocks, each with its’ own courtyard.

From that point on I had to zoom in into a defining part of the area. I chose to work out a corner building block that would serve as an example of an architectural solution for the rest of the area. Because of the two-level structure of the paths it was needed to make a model of the corner building block in order to get a sense of the complicated form and spaces inbetween the structures. The model provided a good overview of the structure and made clear the questionable parts of the design that needed further research.

It was clear that I had to switch back to literature study about the issues the model had presented to me. These issues helped me also to define the structure of my research. I based the research on three main themes: the connectivity, the public spaces and the representativeness of the area. While doing the literature study about these issues I also continued with the design for which the literature study gave a good direction.

The scale of the project forced me to switch between the urban level, architectural level, and the theoretical research many times until I had
a clear vision for the design. The important decision in this process was to use the Old Town of Tallinn as an inspiration for the urban and architectural design. It took me while to make this decision because I wasn't sure if it was the right way to go. After finding interesting theories about “genius loci” I had enough support to make this choice.

In this phase I could finally see how the identity of Tallinn could be represented in the architectural language of the area. I did some more literature research to back up my argumentation and continued with the architectural analysis of the Old Town based on the principles of “gestalt theory”. The architectural analysis helped me to find the essential elements that build up the image of the Old Town. These elements I could use as an inspiration for my architectural design. This was an important stage in my project for defining the character of my design. I played around with various ideas of how to interpret and apply these elements until I had more or less satisfying image. From here on I dived deeper into the technicality of my design to develop this image even further.

Soon I learnt that it was needed to go through this design circle again in order to give the project the final image I was aiming for. I zoomed out on to the whole area in order to apply the elements, I had defined while focusing on the design of the corner building block, to the parts of the project. I was missing the image of the whole and had to still design a couple of essential parts of the area, like the central square and the waterfront. After that I could concentrate on the smaller scales again.

The project in the wider social context

The project addresses in the wider social context the issues of globalization on the field of urbanism and architecture. Globalization has shrunk the world by eliminating the borders both physically and culturally. One taste, one language, one entertainment is present everywhere in the world. Although the development of global culture offers exciting prospects it also introduces new problems.

Due to this unification of cultures there seems to exist a kind of contemporary architectural language that is conquering the whole world from east to west and from north to south. This language is everywhere the same regardless of the location and everything connected to this location. It makes no deeper connection with the place than just standing on the ground it was built on and fulfilling its’ function. This architecture is taking over many cities in the world which makes these cities lose their uniqueness and authenticity. While the public increasingly wants more choice, diversity, distinguishing features and depth in order to enrich their individuality and connect emotionally with the environment, these cities are heading towards monotony and predictability. The cities are losing the power to differentiate themselves from each other by becoming impersonal, anonymous and in the end, not an attractive places to live in.

Therefore in order to connect with the public and to stand out in the Global Village, architects need to start thinking how to make architecture that expresses the identity and authenticity of each place. They should think about how to provide the public with unique experience that can be provided by this certain place only. It is necessary that they try to find the essence of that place and the way how to interpret it architecturally in a countless number of new ways.

This project tries to give an example of a one way it could be done. It tries to find the essence of the city which makes it unique and the way how to give it a contemporary expression.

The second important issue this project addresses is the user focused design approach. It is not only important to think about how the urban spaces or the buildings are best designed to fulfill their functions but also how the people are going to use these after they are built. In order to do that architects have to gain knowledge about how people perceive places and spaces, how they act and react, what they like and don’t like, etc. Often it requires a close collaboration with the users themselves in the early stages of the designing process. It has to become clear that we are designing for the people and in order to make that design attractive and usable we have to know what kind of people are the users and how they use the space or a place. It can be that this kind of design approach costs more time and money and is therefore not attractive, especially for the developers and planners. But on the other hand it has to be understood that a space or place that is not attractive to users after it is built, will also not make the design a success and will therefore be unprofitable.